



**Out of Wood:**

Recent Sculpture

WHITNEY MUSEUM

OF AMERICAN ART

AT PHILIP MORRIS

**Nature has been a general point of** departure for abstraction since the generation of Cézanne and Gauguin. In the twentieth century, biomorphic shapes drawn from organic forms became the mainstay of Surrealism. What came to be known generically as organic abstraction underwent a revival in the early 1970s as artists reacted against the hard-edged rigors of Minimalism. In this context, all the works in the exhibition make reference to natural forms. But they also depend on the special properties of wood. Work of any kind leaves a permanent mark on wood, a mark that cannot be painted over or melted down, which then becomes an integral part of the sculpture. Moreover, all the pieces in the exhibition evolve from the fundamental shape and characteristics of the tree. The artists invent new, raw configurations of sylvan forms and profiles and, through hacking, hewing, sawing, shaping, cutting, and carving, they create a new awareness of the grand physicality as well as the formal and sensual dimensions of wood in its natural state.

Yet “treeness” and “woodness” are not ends unto themselves; rather they enable artists to make statements about quite different objectives. Raoul Hague’s sculptures offer a primeval and idiosyncratic interpretation of the natural medium;

Michael Lekakis fuses dynamic movement with ancient cultural references; Jene Highstein’s wood sculptures balance context and form; wood allows Ursula von Rydingsvard to integrate architecture and landscape; while Mel Kendrick’s sculptures are ultimately self-referential, concerned with sculpture as object and sculpture as process.

The name of Raoul Hague (b. 1905) is synonymous with wood sculpture. Working for five decades with single blocks cut from trees, Hague has produced an impressive body of work with bold, central cores, strong, clear profiles, and polished surfaces. Any one sculpture may yield multiple and distinctive views: the “back” of a work possesses a character and aesthetic sometimes radically and surprisingly different from its “front” or “sides.”

Hague’s single-block, strongly profiled sculptures reveal a distant indebtedness to Constantin Brancusi. From the Romanian modernist Hague also learned—through his mentor John Flannagan in the 1930s—a respect for the organic medium and the technique of direct carving. To this day Hague cuts directly into the wood, without preliminary drawings or maquettes, and his principal tool is the chain saw, supplemented with hand tools. Increasingly in

Raoul Hague, *Feather Farm Cherry*, 1983





Michael Lekakis, *Untitled*, c. 1966–83

the last few years Hague has left the evidence of direct carving visible: rugged and gouged surfaces take precedence over sanded and smoothed finishes.

The sharp profiles of the three works chosen for the exhibition are familiar in Hague's oeuvre, as are the multiple views of *Feather Farm Cherry* and *Willy's Bride* and the centrally organized form of *Bökens Satire*. New, however, is the open core (*Willy's Bride* and *Feather Farm Cherry*) and the exposure of an unnervingly raw, decayed state (*Feather Farm Cherry* and *Bökens Satire*). In these late sculptures, the primeval quality, always an inherent feature in Hague's work, takes center stage in the fragmentary forms, roughly marked passages, and palpable natural decay.

Hague works with no preconceived notions, sculpting only to reveal the form's physical and metaphorical nature. Born in Constantinople of Armenian descent, he has lived in upstate Woodstock, New York, since 1941. He thus brings a European and Romantic sensibility to the evocations of the Catskill landscape that hover around his work. The rough, naturally scarred *Bökens Satire* looks like a Cyclopean head perched on a rocky ledge. Of the three works exhibited here, *Bökens Satire* is the most fantastic—in the eighteenth-century meaning of wondrous or

bizarre. Hague frequently exclaims about some natural feature spotted on a walk or drive that it is "fantastic!" Revealing the amazing and idiosyncratic nature of the mass has been Hague's major preoccupation of the last few years.

Michael Lekakis (1907–1987) also worked primarily in wood for nearly half a century. He aimed to release wood's inner dynamic of form in his sculpture through two fundamental shapes: the crystalline and the spiral. Many of Lekakis' forms are penetrated by or are open to space, many are angled, and many transform inertness into flexibility and rhythm. As a result, Lekakis' wood sculptures project the buoyancy, grace, and movement of the balletic pirouette. The sense of pliancy may owe something to his apprenticeship in his father's florist shop, where he wove woody stems into wreaths and other arrangements.

Lekakis, also a painter, printmaker, and poet, had no formal art education other than a brief period at the Art Students League. His work was sustained by friendships within a loose-knit artistic and intellectual community, which included Ezra Pound and e.e. cummings, and by his cultural heritage.

Born into a Greek community in New York, Lekakis studied Greek philosophy and mythology and traveled extensively



throughout the Ionian peninsula. Many of his sculptures possess a classical sense of the distinctness of individual parts within overall balance and harmony. But the bulbous, swelling forms and the chiseled, spiral ridges of the three hanging works selected for the exhibition evoke older references: to primordial forms of life, to archaic architectural elements such as the slight convexity or entasis of columns, and even to the ancient agrarian practice of planting olive trees on stepped terraces of sunny mountain slopes. The dry, somewhat bleached appearance of many of Lekakis' sculptures magically convey a sense of sun-baked time.

Lekakis' studio on Long Island was surrounded by trees. Here he occasionally enlisted nature in the creation of his works. He planted trees and vines, training them in the espalier method, an ancient fruit-farming technique whereby trees and vines are trained to grow flat against a sunny brick wall or trellis. Lekakis roped, tied, and pruned the branches he intended as sculptures to grow in predetermined directions. After a few years, he cut down the branches and continued with chisels the design begun years before in his "orchard." *Dyskelon*, a large, open V-shaped work, is a result of this method, which fuses a fondness for dynamic form with ancient cultural references.

The wood sculptures of Jene Highstein (b. 1942) maintain a canny equilibrium between concerns of content and form—between the sensuous, "local" information with which wood is filled (whorls, cracks, surface texture, color) and the clear, unencumbered shape. Highstein's early training as a painter at the New York Studio School in 1966, followed by three years at the Royal Academy School, London, explain his sensitivity to the painterly qualities of the sculpture and to the color of wood.

Although Highstein, like the other artists in the group, has no preset image in mind before starting a piece, the shapes that result suggest titles to him. *Finger* invites anthropomorphic associations; *Large Temple* evokes a ritualistic monolith. But the former is no more exclusively about "finger" than the latter is about "temple." The dominant subject of *Finger* is its pointy shape and roughly gouged surface; the primary themes of *Large Temple* are scale (it is the largest wood

sculpture Highstein has tackled to date) and the definition of internal and external space.

Sometimes Highstein brings his knowledge of stone to wood: *Finger*, hewn from a single piece of walnut, passes at a distance as a boulder or stone digit. Other works retain their wood identity while suggesting a kind of muzzled animal power. The jutting short member of *Treeform* rather incongruously brings to mind the short but strong, boxerlike front paw of a kangaroo.

In *Treeform*'s powerfully elegant mass, Highstein found a place for the pictorial drama of black veins (the wood was cut from diseased elm). They are like inked bands marking courses of movement in the light yellow field of the wood. *Treeform* has a low, narrow circumference that gives the sculpture a swaying grace. From the base the form surges upward, its left limb widening in one plane and narrowing almost to a wedge in another—a shift revealed when walking around the sculpture. While at one level *Treeform* is "tree-ness" and "woodness," Highstein couldn't leave it at that. *Treeform* is on the edge of becoming other forms: a thin wedge of a shape where one expects the rounded form of a tree limb, a deep ledge where one expects a natural V-juncture, a muzzled shortened limb where one expects a sawed-off branch, and so on.

Ursula von Rydingsvard (b. 1942) began devoting herself to producing sculpture around 1975. The three works here, drawn from the artist's enormous output of the last two years, are representative of the large-scale environmental sculptures that she regards as highpoints of her work.

The rugged and undulating forms of von Rydingsvard's sculptures owe their alternating pock-filled and projecting surfaces to the method by which they are built. Unlike Hague, Lekakis, and Highstein, she does not begin with a single mass of wood; indeed, she freely admits that the single tree trunk form would overwhelm her. Instead she begins with smaller pieces of wood (4 inches high and deep in lengths ranging from 8 to 24 feet). She cuts and shapes individual blocks, then experiments with the form of the mass by dry-stacking these blocks, eventually laminating, carving, or scarifying the surface texture with different power tools; sometimes the surfaces are

rubbed with graphite. The process of scarifying involves rasping or otherwise marking the wood surface until it looks like a series of raised engraving burrs, which trap or reflect light. Von Rydingsvard's sculptures are labor-intensive, and she relies on two or three assistants to help with the more routine tasks.

Von Rydingsvard was born in Poland to a family of farmers. The memory of anxious years spent in German refugee camps abides in her pieces, which recall the rough barracks of unfinished wood that served as the family's living quarters. As one critic described her works, they are a "Black Forest" of feelings and memories. To a great extent this explains the psycho-

logical mood of *Ursie A's Dream* as well as *House of Spoons*, which offers protection in its U-shaped structure and provokes anxiety in the rough marks left by the circular saw. However, other associations cue us in to the imposing and dignified nature of von Rydingsvard's constructions. The upright wall of *Ursie A's Dream* has scooped-out narrow pockets of space reminiscent of the sculptural niches on cathedral facades; its boldly extending platform evokes the rough furrows of a plowed field. Von Rydingsvard successfully incorporates the motifs and dignity of monumental architecture, while using the receding perspective of the furrowed field to create the illusion of much greater depth.

Jene Highstein, *Treeform*, 1988





Mel Kendrick (b. 1949) majored in sculpture at Trinity College, Hartford, Connecticut, and then attended Hunter College in New York. Throughout his years as a sculptor, he has worked predominantly in wood because it retains the evidence of every decision. Kendrick points out that we don't know how most objects are made today; production methods leave no mark, and electronic or mechanical parts are sealed from our gaze. Kendrick's sculptures refute anonymity and concealment by making the process self-evident and intelligible. His works cluster parts together as if they grew like a crystal or were colonized like coral; all is visible. Until very recently, Kendrick began each work with no preformed concept, a process which he likens to psychoanalysis: "You start out thinking that you know where you are going. . . . After you are involved you find that the problems you set for yourself are not the significant problems at all. The whole process is constantly reinventing itself." And this is what Kendrick's sculptures seem to do as we look at them: they reinvent themselves—and they reinvent nature.

The best of Kendrick's works liberate our sense of tradition and natural order. *Open Cedar* and *Mulberry on Oak Wedge* tilt, preen, and strut a shuffled sense of Cubist structure. But they are really not Cubist structures, for they refuse to resolve into stable, unified, and recognizable forms. *Black Dots* extends a semblance of a giraffe's neck dramatically marked with black circles the artist describes as bark; at the same time, the sculpture swings out an

emphatically clubbed or hoofed foot in the most carefree of gestures. From one angle, *Open Cedar* has a series of clefts positioned like a rib cage; on top sits a goofy animalistic snout. From another angle, Kendrick's cross-cutting makes us focus on the unfamiliar color striations of cedar and the growth process of the tree: the bark is attached to the striking natural colored outer wood that surrounds the older core of red wood. Kendrick's sculptures mesh the biological and the botanical in an ascending, acrobatic structure that shifts our gaze back to the stacking, angling, slicing, and opening of forms.

The three younger artists in the exhibition encourage us to abandon traditional notions of discrete categories: Highstein makes us comfortable with rapid shifts between tree and form; von Rydingsvard accepts no distinction between forest timbers and human memory; Kendrick's sculptures ignore the separation of fauna and flora. All the sculptures except Lekakis' classically oriented works have been produced at a time when the concept of nature as enduring order no longer holds because our natural environment is threatened. In this context, Hague's *Feather Farm Cherry* and Bökens *Satire* read as portraits of the idiosyncratic nature of decay and change. In their approaches to the idea of nature, these artists fragment, reconstruct, or even mutate animal and plant life, tacitly recognizing perceptual and real natural alterations in the world; the sculptures help us accept change.

**Josephine Gear**



## Works in the Exhibition

Dimensions are in inches; height precedes width precedes depth.

### Gallery

**December 15, 1989–February 20, 1990**

**Jene Highstein** (b. 1942)

*Untitled (Finger)*, 1983–84

Walnut, 64 × 22 × 22

Collection of the artist; courtesy

Michael Klein, Inc., New York

**Mel Kendrick** (b. 1949)

*Mulberry on Oak Wedge*, 1989

Mulberry and oak, 78 × 23 × 22

Collection of Zoë and Joel Dictrow

*Open Cedar*, 1989

Cedar, 65 × 21 × 17

John Weber Gallery, New York

**Ursula von Rydingsvard** (b. 1942)

*Ursie A's Dream*, 1988

Cedar and graphite, 72 × 144 × 156

Collection of Edward R. Downe, Jr.

### Sculpture Court

**December 1989–December 1990**

Works may be changed during this yearlong exhibition.

**Raoul Hague** (b. 1905)

*Willy's Bride*, 1981–82

Walnut, 58 × 40 × 58

Lennon, Weinberg, Inc., New York

*Feather Farm Cherry*, 1983

Cherry, 52 × 64 × 46

Lennon, Weinberg, Inc., New York

*Bökens Satire*, 1986

Walnut, 64 × 37 × 44

Lennon, Weinberg, Inc., New York

**Jene Highstein** (b. 1942)

*Treeform*, 1988

Elm, 80 × 48 × 24

Collection of the artist; courtesy

Michael Klein, Inc., New York

*Large Temple*, 1989

Cedar, 168 × 84 × 84

Collection of the artist; courtesy

Michael Klein, Inc., New York

**Mel Kendrick** (b. 1949)

*Black Dots*, 1989

Basswood, glue, and black paint,

145 × 60 × 120

John Weber Gallery, New York

**Michael Lekakis** (1907–1987)

*Strovilos II*, c. 1965–80

Black pine, approximately 84 × 10 × 10

Kouros Gallery, New York

*Dyskelon*, c. 1965–84

Cherry, approximately 76 × 204 × 36

Kouros Gallery, New York

*Untitled*, c. 1966–83

Elm, approximately 44 × 52 × 8

Kouros Gallery, New York

**Ursula von Rydingsvard** (b. 1942)

*House of Spoons*, 1989

Cedar, graphite, and stain, 96 × 72 × 48

Lorence-Monk Gallery, New York

*Lace Mountains*, 1989

Cedar and graphite, 95½ × 98½ × 35

Lorence-Monk Gallery, New York

Back panel:

Ursula von Rydingsvard, *Ursie A's Dream*, 1988

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Kendrick); and Andrew Gerndt (Hague).

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Mel Kendrick, *Mulberry on Oak Wedge*, 1989

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